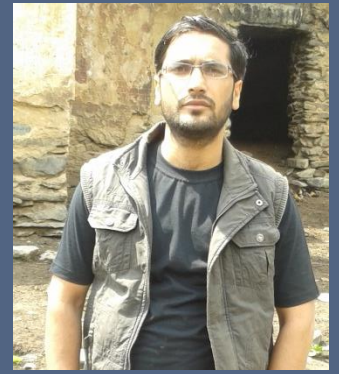




Ancient Kashmir A Geo-political Profile

*(A PORTION FROM MY DISSERTATION ON RELIGIONS OF ANCIENT
KASHMIR, A CASE STUDY OF KASHMIR)*

By

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Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir is the name given to the northernmost state of Indian Union which generally speaking stretches from the east of the river Indus to the west of river Ravi. Projecting deep into the heart of Asia, Jammu and Kashmir covers an area of 222,713 Square Kilometers, extending from 32°17' to 36°58'N and from 73°26' to 80°30'E. Conveniently called by the shorter term Kashmir and *Kasheer* by the natives, the state includes besides the valley the areas of Jammu, Ladakh, Baltistan, Gilgit, Hunza and Nagar. Area wise the state is the second largest state in the Republic of India. However the Pakistan aggression in 1947-48 A.D resulted in a considerable change to its actual area. At the cease-fire in 1949, 78932 Sq. Km of the state's territory remained under the illegal occupation of Pakistan. Another major change occurred when the People's Republic of China launched a massive attack on India in 1962 and forcibly occupied 37,555 Square Kilometers of the Indian Territory in Ladakh Division of the State. Later Pakistan transferred 5,180 Square Kilometers of State's territory under its illegal occupation to China.

With 11400, 370¹ inhabitants residing in the area on the Indian side, the state has the lowest density of population in India. For, unlike vast plains of the rest of the country, Kashmir is mostly mountainous, rising in several tiers from the plains in the south to the high altitude valleys and peaks in the North, enclosing some of the loftiest inhabited hamlets in the world. Obviously with such diversities of physical features, the state offers interesting variations in its soil, elevation, geological formation, climate, vegetation and the people. This diversity in aspect apart from having influenced and largely shaped the history of the State is in itself an interesting study. By virtue of its central position in Asia, Kashmir commands strategic importance touching on the North West Afghanistan, on the North, the Sinkuing-Uighur Autonomous region of China and on the West Pakistan. It stands on the old Central Asian Trade Route and the Kashmir Valley has since ancient times, been the halting place of the Caravans traveling between the plains of India and high reaches of central Asia. The region experiences tropical heat. The celebrated valley of Kashmir nestled securely among the Himalayas at an average height of 1829metres above the sea is approximately 135 Km in length and 32 to 40 Km in breadth. North east and west range after range of mountains guard the valley from the outer world and in the south it is cut off from the Punjab by rocky barriers, 80 to 120 Km in width. The mountain snows feed the river Jhelum and the streams and it is calculated that the Jhelum in its course through the valley has a catchment area of nearly 10, 240 Sq.Km.²Politically Ancient Kashmir was generally confined to its geographical limits. But at times it extended its influence beyond the boundary. According to Ptolemy (2nd A.D) *Kasperia* lay between the land of Darads and the land of the Kulindas on the Hyphasis and extended eastwards (Ptolemy vii, i, 42). When Hiuen Tsang visited the valley in the middle of the 7th century A.D, he found all adjacent territories on the west and south down to the plains under the sway of the king of Kashmir (Durlabhavardhana of Karkota Dynasty). He clearly records that Taksila to the east of the Indus, Urasa or Hazara, Simhapura or Salt Range with the smaller hill states of Rajpuri and Parnotsa were not independent, but subject to Kashmir.³In the middle of the 8th century Lalitaditya conquered territories as far as Kanacy in the east and his grandson Jayapida is said to have had trials of strength with the

rulers of Kanauj, Gauda and Nepal. Samkaravarman (A.D. 883-902) annexed Darvabhisara and some parts of the Northern Punjab to the kingdom of Kashmir proper. Kalasa (A.D. 1063-1089) conquered the hilly state of Rajpuri and among the neighboring kingdoms which acknowledged his supremacy were Campa, Vallapura, Lohara, Urasa, Kada and Kasthanvata. If Rajtarangini of Kalhana Pandit is to be believed.⁴

2.1 Physical Features:

The characteristic physical features of Kashmir are its strong mountainous ramparts, its lovely lakes and rivers and its pale red Karewas. The valley of Kashmir is surrounded on all sides by a chain of mountain ranges which hasten away in wild confusion to the great Promontory of *Nanga Parbat* (26,182 feet). To the East rises *Harmukh* (16,903 feet) which guards the valley of Sindh. On the South is *Mahadeo* looking down upon Srinagar, the high range of *Gwash Brare* (17,321 feet) and the lofty peak of *Amarnath* (17,321 feet). The *Pir Pamtal* range with peaks of 15,000 feet or more stands on the South-West, over which the ancient trade route with Punjab lay. Further North is *Tosmaidan* (14,000 feet) and in the North-West rises the majestic *Kajinag* (12,125 feet).⁵

The surrounding mountain ranges have largely determined the political destiny of the valley, making it impregnable and inaccessible. While powerful neighboring kingdoms succumbed to the onslaught of the invaders, Kashmir's natural defenses saved her from impending foreign domination. Perhaps, it was not the valor of the Kashmirian army but the defense furnished by the mountain ramparts which many a time turned the tide of invasion from the valley (Al Biruni has also attested to this fact in his *Kitab-al-Hind*). Guarded from the outer world by chains of mountains, she was able to preserve her ancient culture for a considerable time and develop her social and economic system in her own way.

The valley is dotted with numerous lakes that shine like gems under a sunlit sky, rivers with merry ripple to bear the bulk of Kashmir's trade. The latter also serve as very useful commercial waterways from a remote past. In fact in ancient times, there were few roads fit for wheeled traffic and communication with outer territories was restricted to difficult bridle-paths and tracks passable only to load carrying collies. The rivers played an important role in the country's internal as well as external trade as most of it was carried by river ways. The position of the most of towns on river banks, shows the historical importance of riverine trade and traffic.⁶

The Udars or Karewas are names given to alluvial plateaus of Kashmir which according to most geologists were formed by lacustrine deposits. They range in height from 100 to 300 feet above the level of the ravines and valleys that intersect them and that are cut into twins by the swift flowing mountain streams rushing to the river *Vitasta* (Jhelum). The area covered by each Udar varies from 5 to 50 Square Miles. In ancient times when the population of the valley was probably much larger than the present⁷, the whole land was extensively cultivated to meet the food demand of such a large population. Consequently a

very detailed arrangement had to be made for the proper irrigation of these Udars. Many of the irrigation channels which we find in the present day Kashmir are of ancient date. The chronicles also refer to some of the water courses which were conducted over the Udars from the higher ground behind. A large number of Udars being isolated, water cannot be brought over them. Their productivity depends solely upon rainfall.

The Kingdom of Ancient Kashmir however was a territory much smaller than the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir. It denoted an irregularly oval valley, 84 miles long from the North-East to the South-West and 20 to 25 miles broad; between 33° to 34°35'N and 74°8' to 75°25'E. It was surrounded by snow-capped mountains varying at different points from 12,000 to 18,000 feet in height.⁸ According to Dr.S.C.Ray, the name of Kashmir does not occur in the Vedic literature. In Rig Vedic hymns mention is made of a river called Marudvrdha (Rig-Veda x, 755). Some scholars identify it with the small Kashmirian stream Maruwardwan which flows from north to south and joins the Chenab on its northern bank at Kishtwar and on the basis of this information conclude that the Aryans held a part at least of the secluded Vale of Kashmir.⁹

In Sanskrit literature, the earliest reference to Kashmir is found in Panini's Grammar and in Patanjali's great commentary on it. There the term *Kasmira* and its derivation *Kasmira* are stated as the name of the country and its inhabitants respectively. Mahabharata refers in several passages to the *Kasmiras* and their king but merely indicates that the valley was situated in hilly regions to the North of India.¹⁰ Similarly some of the Puranas refer to the *Kasmiras* in the list of northern nations¹¹. Varamahira (A.D 500) in his *Brahatsmhitā* includes *Kasmiras* in the north eastern division.¹² Sri Harsa in his *Ratnavali* (7th A.D) refers to the saffron of the *Kasmira* country which according to him was the best of all types of saffrons. He says;

“*Kasmiradesaje ksetra kumkumm yadbhaveddhi tat|*

*Susmakesaram araktam padmagandhi taduttamaam||*¹³

(In the land of Kashmir where beautiful Saffron grows, it is the best type, red colored with the fragrance of lotus)

The earliest note on Kashmir by foreigners occurs in the writings of Hecataeus who refer to *Kaspapyros*, the city the Gandarians. Herodotus mentions the city of *Kaspatyros* as the place at which embarked the expedition under Scylax of Koryanda sent by Darius to explore the courses of the Indus. Ptolemy (150 A.D) in his geographical account of India, refers to a region called *Kasperia* lying below the sources of the Bidaspes (Vitasta) and of the Sandabal (Candrabhega) and of the Adris (Iravati)(Geography vii,I,42). The first Chinese traveler to the valley of Kashmir was probably *Che-mong* who visited Kashmir shortly after 404 A.D. Fa-Yong, another Chinese traveler visited Kashmir for more than a year to study the Buddhist texts.¹⁴ A Chinese record dated A.D 541, describes the northern part of India as a

country enveloped on all sides like a precious jewel by the snowy mountains with a valley in the south which leads up to it and serves as the gate of the kingdom.¹⁵ Certainly this is a distinct reference to the valley of Kashmir. Hieun Tsang who visited Kashmir in the year 631 A.D and stayed there for two years. His account of the land is full and accurate. His description of the kingdom of *kia-shi-mi-lo* shows that it included within its limits the great basin of the Vitasta and the side valleys drained by its tributaries above the Baramula defile. He observes that the valley is surrounded on all sides by mountains which have saved it from the onslaughts of the neighboring states. The land is said to have been fruitful and fertile and the climate cold with plenty of snowfall.¹⁶

The information that may be scrapped together from the Muslim writers on the historical geography of Kashmir is indeed scanty. According to the Al-Masudi it was a land with many towns and villages enclosed on all sides by mountains, through which led a single passage closed by a gate. This is practically everything that writers like Al- Qazwani, Al Idrisi and other Arab geographers tell us about Kashmir.¹⁷ The only Arabic work which furnishes us with a very detailed and accurate account of the valley of Kashmir is Albiruni's Kitab-ul-Hind. Albiruni seems to have gathered most of his information about Kashmir during his long stay at Ghazna and in the Punjab between A.D 1017 and 1030. He was particularly interested about Kashmir because it was the seat of all Hindu Sciences at the time and he distinctly states that among his informants there were many Kashmirian scholars.¹⁸ Al-Biruni correctly places Kashmir in that mountainous region which lies between the Central Asian watershed and the plains of Punjab .At that time the best known entrance to Kashmir from the west led through the central portion of Hazara to Manshera and then across the Kunhar(Kusnari) and Kisanganga (Mehwi) rivers to Muzaffarabad and then by the right of the Jhelum Valley to Baramulla. As one left the village of Uskur on the way, one reached the Adhithana i.e; the capital Srinagar. It stood on both the banks of the Jhelum joined by bridges and ferry boats. The area of the capital was about four *farsakh*.¹⁹

The courses of the river Jailam(Jhelum) have also been traced with much accuracy by the Arab Scholar. From the foot of the mountains, it was two days journey along the river to reach the capital. About four *farsakh* further from Adhithana, the river reached a large swamp. Al-Biruni mentions the fortress of Lohara, the Loharakotta of the Rajtarangini.²⁰ The Muslim scholar closes his chapter on the geography with an account of the Rajawari which is undoubtedly the town of Rajapuri, the capital of the hill state of Rajapuri mentioned in the chronicle. It was the farthest limit to which the Muslim traders of Al-Biruni's time could reach, and beyond which they never crossed.²¹

The last foreign writer of the period under study, who has left an account of Kashmir, is Marco Polo (1250 A.D).He mentions some of the habits and customs of the Kashmirians, their food and drink and of their physical features. Marco Polo states about the prosperous towns and villages, forests, deserts tracts and strong passes so that the people have no fear of anybody and keep their independence with a king of their own to rule and do justice. The Venetian traveler's evidence about the natural defenses of the valley receives corroboration

from Al-Biruni and Ou-Kong as mentioned earlier. Marco Polo refers to a number of idolaters, abbeys and monestries²² which will be discussed in details in the forthcoming chapters.

The Indigenous literature of Kashmir throws a flood of light on the early geography and topography of the land. The earliest Sanskrit literature of the Valley, so far known is the Nilmat Puran. Let me quote the words of Buhler, “it is a real mine of information regarding the sacred places of Kashmir and their legends.”²³ Besides the reference to the legendry origin of the country and the rites and worships prescribed by Nila and observed by the people, the work dilates upon such various topics as the principal Nagas or Sacred springs of Kashmir, the origin of the Vular Lake, the places consecrated to Siva and Vishnu, the sacred river confluences and lakes, the chief tirthas of the land and in the end upon the sanctity of the river Vitasta”.²⁴

Ksemendra, the polyhistor, in his Samayamatika furnishes us with some useful information about the topographical details of his country. To him we owe the first reference to the Pir Pantsal route (Pancaladhara).²⁵ After Ksemendra, came Somadeva, the author of the Kathasaritasagara. He describes Kashmir as a region in the south of the Himalyas washed by the waters of the Vitasta. He mentions some of the holy sites of the valley such as the Vijayaksetra, Namdiksetra, Varahaksetra, Mandapaksetra and Uttaramammanasa and the town of Hiranyapura.²⁶

Bilhana who lived during the reigns of Kalasa and Harsa(1063-89A.D) has also left an account of his native valley. In the last chapter of his poem, the *Vikramankadevacarita*, he gives us a vivid picture of the Kashmirian Capital and the Village of Khanmusa, where he was born. His account, apart from its poetical beauties, is full of local details.²⁷ For the history as well as for the early geography of the valley; Kalhana’s chronicle is a very important document. In the first book of his work, he gives us an account of the legends relating to the creation of Kashmir and its sacred river, the Vitasta and refers besides to the most famous of the many *tirthas* in which Kashmir was abundant, the abode of sages.²⁸

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